DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 506 CS 012 939

AUTHOR Smith, Carl B.
TITLE Vocabulary Instruction and Reading Comprehension. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CS-97-07
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 4p.
CONTRACT RR93002011
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Indiana University, 2805 E. 10th Street, Suite 150, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Content Area Reading; Elementary Secondary Education; Instructional Effectiveness; *Language Arts; *Reading Comprehension; Reading Improvement; *Reading Strategies; *Vocabulary Development; *Vocabulary Skills
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; *Word Knowledge

ABSTRACT

Based on the idea that word knowledge has particular importance in literate societies, this Digest finds that most people feel that there is a common sense relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension, i.e., messages are composed of ideas, and ideas are expressed in words. The Digest considers several viewpoints on teaching vocabulary, offers some strategies for vocabulary teaching, and suggests some sources for further reading about vocabulary instruction and reading comprehension. (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 412 506

Vocabulary Instruction and Reading Comprehension

ERIC Digest

by

Carl B. Smith

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication

EDO-CS-97-07

CS 012 939

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ERIC Digest

Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication

Indiana University
2805 E. 10th Street, Suite 150

D126

Bloomington, Indiana 47408-2698
(812) 855-5847; (800) 759-4723

Vocabulary Instruction and Reading Comprehension

By Carl B. Smith

Word knowledge has particular importance in literate societies. It contributes significantly to achievement in the subjects of the school curriculum, as well as in formal and informal speaking and writing. Most people feel that there is a common sense relationship between vocabulary and comprehension--messages are composed of ideas, and ideas are expressed in words. Most theorists and researchers in education have assumed that vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension are closely related, and numerous studies have shown the strong correlation between the two (Baker, 1995; Nagy, 1988; Nelson-Herber, 1986).

Although the opportunities for vocabulary instruction are especially pronounced in language arts and reading, vocabulary instruction properly belongs in all subjects of the curriculum in which learners meet both new ideas and the words by which they are represented in the language. This Digest will consider several viewpoints on teaching vocabulary, offer some strategies for implementing vocabulary teaching, and suggest some sources for further reading.

Teacher's Dilemma

From a teacher's point of view the issue in the classroom usually revolves around how to improve the student's reading comprehension, whether it be in content area reading or in the language arts. Should the teacher teach vocabulary directly or incidentally? That is, should words be targeted for the learners or should they develop naturally through reading and the learner's desire to clarify concepts? Evidence falls in both directions. Certainly vocabulary knowledge can be acquired through reading and discussions about certain contexts (Nagy et al, 1985). But it appears that direct instruction is more effective than incidental learning for the acquisition of a particular vocabulary, and also more efficient (McKeown and Beck, 1988). However, in one study of fourth graders that examined whether a context or a definitional approach was better for vocabulary development, Szymborski (1995) found that there was no significant difference in raw scores between the samples using the two different approaches.

Instructional Techniques

It is generally accepted that students learn vocabulary more effectively when they are directly involved in constructing meaning rather than in memorizing definitions or synonyms. Thus, techniques such as webbing that involve students' own perspectives in creating interactions that gradually clarify targeted vocabulary may be a way to combine direct teaching and incidental learning in one exercise. Teachers can use students' personal experiences to develop vocabulary in the classroom. Through informal activities such as semantic association students brainstorm a list of words associated with a familiar word, pooling their knowledge of pertinent vocabulary as they discuss the less familiar words on the list. Semantic mapping goes a step further, grouping the words on the list into categories and arranging them on the visual "map" so that relationships among the words become clearer. In semantic feature analysis, words are grouped according to certain features, usually with the aid of a chart that graphically depicts similarities and differences among features of different words. Finally, analogies are a useful way of encouraging thoughtful discussion about relationships among meanings of words.

Content Area Reading

In content area reading, the development of vocabulary as a study of relationships seems particularly pertinent. Recognition of isolated information in an article on mechanization, for instance, may represent little understanding of the changes that are occurring as industry moves from human labor to robotics. Barton and Calfee (1989) suggest using a vocabulary matrix to establish the dimensions of a subject. The power of any vocabulary matrix lies in its image of connected ideas, in its process of discovering context for a new word, and in its visual reminder of gaps in our understanding.

Vocabulary development in any subject can proceed by asking students to reveal any vocabulary framework that they already have. Those known words may help them associate meaning

Carl B. Smith is the Director of ERIC/REC and Professor of Language Education at Indiana University.

CS012539

with new vocabulary. In that way, definitions and the particular meaning within a given sentence have a context and a set of relations to build on.

One group technique that enables students to list synonyms and/or definitional phrases that they already associate with the topic involves the construction of a simple T-bar chart. Suppose, for example, an article on protecting the environment includes the word "menace." The teacher lists words that students associate with threats to the environment. Associated terms and synonyms are them listed in the T-bar chart.

With this kind of visual representation of a word and related terms, a matrix is begun for most students and the definition is enriched. The semantic context may now be rich enough for the reader to use this word in its context (Moore et al, 1989). To build background and to understand vocabulary in content area reading, students need the benefit of seeing multiple relationships.

Teaching Vocabulary

Christen and Murphy (1991) contend that research clearly emphasizes that for learning to occur, new information must be integrated with what the learner already knows. They feel that teaching vocabulary as a prereading step is an instructional intervention that should be considered when readers lack the prior or background knowledge to read in a content area. Kueker (1990) also argues that prereading activities help enormously in reading comprehension.

Another technique to help students see a word in a broader context is to have them answer the following questions: (1) what is it?; (2) what is it like?; (3) what are some examples? Schwartz and Raphael (1985) believe that this list of 3 questions helps students see relationships between familiar and less familiar terms and also brings the meaning of an unknown term into focus by requiring analogies and examples.

Language Arts

In facilitating vocabulary instruction in the language arts classroom, Hodapp and Hodapp (1996) suggest using vocabulary packs and cued spelling as intervention strategies, while Cooter (1991) discusses using storytelling. Wilkinson (1994) opts for enlivening vocabulary lessons by combining them with two effective teaching strategies--cooperative learning and story development by students. Ruddiman (1993) also offers activities for vocabulary development. Bear et al (1996) presents a practical way for teachers to study words with students, providing more than 300 word study activities which are set up to follow literacy development from emergent to more mature, specialized stages. For an overview of current information on vocabulary instruction and acquisition, see Baker (1995).

References

Baker, Scott K., et al (1995). "Vocabulary Acquisition: Curricular and Instructional Implications for Diverse Learners." Technical Report No. 14. Eugene, OR: National Center to Improve the Tools of Educators. [ED 386 861]

Barton, J., and R. Calfee (1989). "Theory Becomes Practice: One Program." in Diane Lapp et al (Eds.), *Content Area Reading and Learning: Instructional Strategies*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. [ED 304 673]

Bear, Donald R., et al (1996). *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary, and Spelling Instruction*. New York: Merrill. [ED 386 685]

Christen, William L., and Thomas J. Murphy (1991). "Increasing Comprehension by Activating Prior Knowledge." ERIC Digest. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication. [ED 328 885]

Cooter, Robert B., Jr. (1991). "Storytelling in the Language Arts Classroom." *Reading Research and Instruction*, 30(2), 71-76. [EJ 424 278]

Hodapp, Joan B., and Albert F. Hodapp (1996). "Vocabulary Packs and Cued Spelling: Intervention Strategies." Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Association of School Psychologists (Atlanta). [ED 396 271]

Kueker, Joan (1990). "Prereading Activities: A Key to Comprehension." Paper presented at the International Confreence on Learning Disabilities (Austin, TX). [ED 360 785]

McKeown, Margaret G., and Isabel L. Beck (1988). "Learning Vocabulary: Different Ways for Different Goals," *Remedial and Special Education (RASE)*, 9(1), 42-46. [EJ 367 432]

Moore, David W., et al (1989). *Prereading Activities for Content Area Reading and Learning*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. [ED 300 786]

Nagy, William E., et al (1985). "Learning Word Meanings from Context: How Broadly Generalizable?" Technical Report No. 347. Urbana,IL: Center for the Study of Reading. [ED 264 546]

Nagy, William (1988). *Teaching Vocabulary to Improve Reading Comprehension*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English; Newark, DE: International Reading Association. [ED 298 471]

Nelson-Herber, Joan (1986). "Expanding and Refining Vocabulary in Content Areas." *Journal of Reading*, 29, 626-33.

Ruddiman, Joan, et al (1993). "Open to Suggestion." *Journal of Reading*, 36(5), 400-09. [EJ 459 161]

Schwartz, Robert M., and Taffy Raphael (1985). "Concept of Definition: A Key to Improving Students' Vocabulary." *Reading Teacher*, 39(2), 198-205. [EJ 325 191]

Szymborski, Julie Ann (1995). *Vocabulary Development: Context Clues versus Word Definitions*. M.A. Project, Kean College of New Jersey. [ED 380 757]

Wilkinson, Molly (1994). "Using Student Stories to Build Vocabulary in Cooperative Learning Groups." *Clearing House*, 67(4), 221-23. [EJ 486 167]

This publication was prepared with partial funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract number RR93002011. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.